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*Increasing Your Odds**

a guide to
applying and
interviewing
for Federal jobs

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Adapted from *Marketing Yourself (or) From Ruts...to Raises*,
by the BLM Integrated Workforce Committee, June 1989.

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Introduction

Now that you've made the decision to apply for a new Federal position, you want to do your best to develop a winning application. The three greatest hurdles in the application process are preparing an application; writing a narrative statement addressing your knowledge, skills, and

abilities (KSAs); and interviewing. This pamphlet provides hints on how to tailor your application to a particular vacancy announcement and on how to put your best foot forward in a personal interview. It also includes other references for additional information or more detail.

•
There are three
kinds of people
in the world—
the wills,
the won'ts,
and the can'ts.
The first
accomplish
everything;
the second
oppose
everything;
the third
fail in everything.
•

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How to Prepare Your Application for Specific Vacancies

In the past, Standard Form 171 (SF 171), Application for Federal Employment, was used throughout the Federal Government to apply for jobs. But in January 1995, the Federal Government issued a much simpler application, Optional Form 612 (OF 612), Optional Application for Federal Employment. Generally, candidates may use the OF 612, a resume, or other written format (including an SF 171) to apply for a position. The vacancy announcement will specify which form is required to apply.

Regardless of the type of application used, you

should take advantage of the opportunity it provides to sell yourself as the right person for the job. Your application introduces a personnel specialist and selecting official to your experience and education, skills training, outside activities, awards, etc., and ultimately influences their determinations. Therefore, it is essential that you submit an application that reflects careful preparation.

It is best to prepare your application or resume in a way that reflects your background as it applies to the advertised position. The vacancy announcement

•
**The kind of people
I look for
to fill top
management
spots are the
eager beavers,
the mavericks.
These are the
people who try
to do more than
they're expected
to do—they
always reach.**

- Lee Iacocca
•

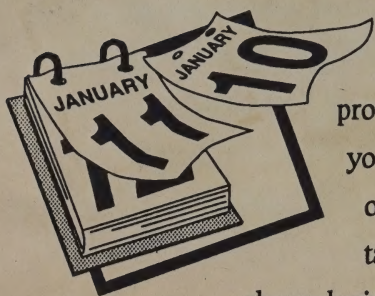
will usually list major duties of the position and the evaluation factors. When you prepare your application, complete all items on the form as thoroughly as possible—do not assume that someone else will understand what is not there. If you plan to submit a resume, be sure you provide all required information as outlined in the brochure *Applying for a Federal Job* (OF 510). In addition to your work experience, other elements, such as relevant awards, training, self-development, outside activities, and supervisory appraisal are evaluated as indicators of your ability to perform the specific ranking factors of the position.

It is important to be concise in describing your experience. However, be specific enough so that the person reviewing the application can easily identify your knowledge, skills, abilities, responsibilities, and interests. Take the time to note:

- What you do.
- What skills you use to do the work.
- What your specific responsibilities are. You should always describe your duties and responsibilities as you perform them and in your own words. Never attach copies of position descriptions. While you will find your official position descriptions useful when preparing your application, a selecting official will seldom read attachments of this sort.



- How you use your own judgment and initiative in the position. Show accomplishments such as special assignments, details, task forces, and especially supervisory/managerial experiences.



If you need more space to document your specific work experience than is provided, use plain bond paper and list your work experience in chronological order. Avoid lengthy or fragmented attachments and be sure they are also in chronological order.

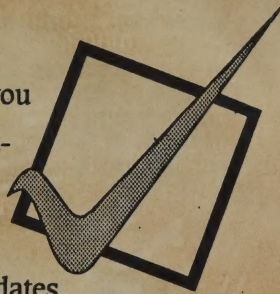
Another important point is to include periods of unemployment so your work history has a continuous flow. You may want to include a brief explanation of any unemployment. If you have employment in two instances covering the same time periods, be sure to indicate how they fit in, i.e., "part-time" work while employed as ___ from (date) to (date). You should only summarize work/volunteer experience older than 10 years, unless it has direct relationship to the vacant position.

Do not overlook opportunities to document your outside activities, education, awards, and training, especially if they are relevant to the position for which you are applying. If a transcript or listing of college courses is required, be sure to attach it to your application.

In providing references, include only those who are knowledgeable about your work experiences and contact them before listing

them as a reference. Avoid using “buddies.” Use references the selecting official can easily contact and who are willing to provide a positive recommendation.

Once you have completed your application, you may want to have someone review it for a critical analysis of grammar, sentence structure, and overall continuity. In addition, be sure to make any necessary modifications and updates, such as the kind of position for which you are applying, vacancy announcement number, and the lowest grade you will accept. Be flexible here, and explain when it may be appropriate for you to consider a lower grade. Also include whether you will accept part-time and/or temporary work. And if you make additional copies of your application, the appearance should be as good as the original. Sign the copy with an original signature.

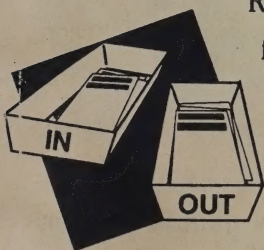


It may be pertinent to include a cover sheet with your application to briefly explain why you feel you are well qualified for the position and how you meet any selective placement factors or ranking factors. This cover sheet may also include any other specific information you wish to share.

Supervisory appraisals are another important part of your application package. Give your supervisor suggestions about what should be addressed in the appraisal. If your supervisor is extremely busy or has given inadequate appraisals before, you may want to consider writing your own. Give your supervisor a copy

and make her/him feel as though you're only trying to help her/him save time. Be careful not to offend your supervisor.

When you submit your application, it is important to keep a record of the vacancies for which you have applied and the telephone number where you will be able to obtain information about your application if necessary.



Remember, personnel specialists and selecting officials must rely on how well you present your personal qualifications on your application and cannot make assumptions regarding your knowledge, skills, abilities, etc.

KSAs: The Beauty & the Beast

What are KSAs?

KSAs can be simply defined as: knowledge—something you know; ability—something you can do; and skill—how well you do it. KSAs are written to identify one simple or readily identifiable characteristic.

No, KSAs were not developed by a sadistic person with nothing better to do than look forward to retirement.

The KSA process was actually developed by a group of sane people who were looking for better ways to rate and evaluate job candidates.

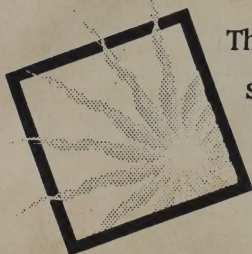
When contemplating responses to KSAs, keep in mind that they offer you the opportunity to “sell yourself” to the selecting official. The better you portray yourself, the better your opportunity to be selected. Face it, there are a lot of exceptionally qualified candidates in the job market, all waiting to advance or even make a lateral move.

The beast of the KSA is the time, agony, and procrastination that generally goes along with providing detailed evidence of your experience, training, education, awards, hobbies, self-development, and other aspects of your background as it relates to

•
Don't be afraid to fail.
Don't waste energy trying to cover up failure.
Learn from your failures and go on to the next challenge.
It's okay to fail.
If you're not failing, you're not growing.

•
- H. Stanley Judd

the KSAs. Frequently, KSAs are nonspecific and appear impersonal, abstract, and repetitive of information requested on the application.



The **beauty**, on the other hand, is that KSA responses give you the opportunity to specifically address the items the selecting official feels are the most important. They also give you the chance to show how well you express yourself in writing. Oh, and one more thing—they encourage brevity. Two pages are all you get to sell your attributes. Generally, if you do a good job, you will seldom need additional space.

A narrative statement addressing KSAs does three things for you as an applicant:

- It presents an original writing sample which is guaranteed to be read and evaluated by the prospective hiring agency.
- It adds job-specific tailoring to your application without requiring you to prepare an entirely new application.
- It presents the opportunity for you to convince others that your background matches the vacancy requirement. The narrative statement should be considered a written interview.

How KSAs are Used

When your application reaches the servicing personnel office, it is rated against the standards in the Qualifications Handbook. If your application meets the qualification standards, it may be forwarded to a panel, which will rate your application against the KSAs using a rating plan.

A rating plan is developed jointly by the selecting official and a personnel specialist, and is to be used as a guide for ranking eligible candidates. The rating plan defines a “superior” and “acceptable” competence



level for each KSA. The rating plan also assigns weight to each KSA on a one- to three-point scale relative to its importance, with three points assigned to those KSAs considered most crucial for successful performance in the position.

You do not have access to the rating plan during the preparation of your application. However, extra time spent fine-tuning your KSAs could make the difference between “acceptable” and “superior,” and therefore your total score.

Here are a few techniques you may find useful in preparing your responses to the KSAs:

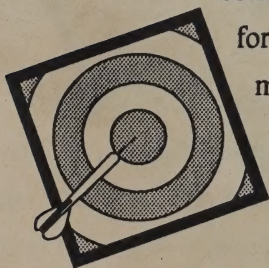
- Carefully review the ranking factors of the vacancy announcement. Ask yourself if your background meets all or most of the criteria; if it does, then you are ready to

start writing. If you are uncertain whether your background matches, meet with a supervisor or other person who can help you make that determination.

- List examples of your experience which demonstrate your capabilities for each of the KSAs. It may help you to set the list aside for a day or two to allow your memory to work.

- Write a short description of your related experience for each element; one or two paragraphs is the general rule.

Concentrate on developing a concise summary for each element. Remember that your submission/summary will be judged as a writing sample. Sell yourself!!! Develop the statement as though it were an oral answer to an interview question.



- Set up an appealing format. Be sure that your statement is typed, your thoughts flow well, and there is a natural progression from one statement to the next. Normally, repeating the ranking factor just as it was stated on the announcement is recommended. If limited to a specific number of pages, avoid crowding of information to squeeze in more information.
- Transmit the original narrative along with your application. The original copy gives the impression that you did

special work on your application package for the specific job opportunity.

- Maintain and build upon your narrative statement file. Often related (generic) KSAs are required for common occupational areas. The more a KSA statement is rewritten, the better it becomes.

A Few Dos and Don'ts for KSAs

Do:

- Read the whole announcement carefully. Focus on duties and responsibilities of the job. Phone the selecting official for additional information or for clarification regarding duties.
- Follow the agency's specific instructions.
- Provide specific examples of experience and level of your involvement.
- Repeat work descriptions from your application.
- Write "I" statements in clear, concise language.
- Focus on progress, achievements, recognition.



- Use professional jargon, acronyms, technical terminology as appropriate.

Don't:



- Exaggerate or fabricate.
- Ramble into unrelated areas or attempt to bluff.
- Cut and paste work descriptions from your application.
- Neglect KSA response.
- Send "old" narratives to all related jobs.

KSAs are an important part of your application package. Don't neglect them or expect personnel specialists and selecting officials to interpret them. Be clear, concise, and honest. When you have written your response, get someone to read it and give you an honest assessment.

Always remember, **market yourself**. No one else will!

Interviews

No matter how well you present yourself through your application or your KSA responses, the interview is the final hurdle and the most important part of the selection process. It is your last chance to convey what you can bring to the position you're applying for. The interview is when the employer makes that final determination of your personal characteristics and whether you will fit in with the organization.

Preparing for the Interview

- Know and believe in your goals and objectives.

- Know and understand your strengths and weaknesses; be honest with yourself and with the interviewer.
- Find out as much as you can about the interviewer, the position for which you are applying, and the unwritten tasks. Just because it is advertised as a Range Conservationist position doesn't mean you won't be doing some land use planning or forestry work.

•
(You)
should think
in terms of
competing
only with
(yourself)...
as in golf,
where what
it's all about
is to better
yourself.

- Polly Bergen
•

All things being equal, you may have other skills which would help separate you from the other candidates. Obtaining information prior to

the interview can also help you relate yourself and your experience to the written and unwritten needs of the job.

- Write down your experience—don't limit yourself to paying jobs; many volunteer or hobby activities may have provided you with valuable experience.

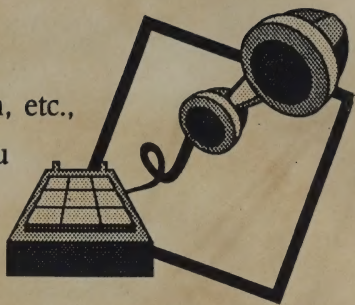
Person-to-Person Interviewing

- Dress properly for the interview—find out what employees wear and tailor yourself to the situation. If you're not sure, it's better to look too professional than too casual.
- Prepare yourself to deal with the nervousness you'll feel when you get to the interview. The nervous feelings you get are nothing more than an overload of adrenaline, so it's best to use some of it up with physical movement. Obviously the physical movement must be something that can be done without making a mess of yourself before the interview. Try some isometric exercises in the car or in the restroom just prior to the interview.
- Arrive early—being late will hurt your prospects with the interviewer.
- Bring any documentation of your accomplishments with you. Don't bring the entire file, only the essential elements.



Telephone Interviewing

- Have your notes, application, etc., ready at all times in case you receive a telephone call for your interview (which is common).

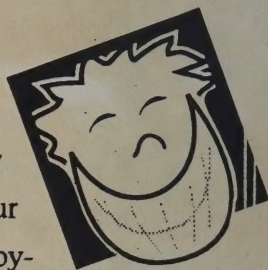


- Don't hesitate to ask if you can call the interviewer right back if the area where you work is noisy and distracting. Then get to a quiet area and call back at the agreed-upon time.
- If you are working on a project with a specific deadline and cannot take the time for the interview, it's okay to ask to return the call or set up another time. Be sure to explain your reason for making the return call, and agree on a specific time/date. Then be ready!

During the Interview

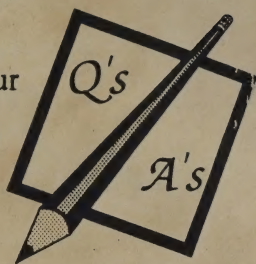
- Listen carefully to the questions and keep your replies on target—be precise.
- Observe proper etiquette: (1) if the interview is in person, don't smoke, eat, or drink even if invited to do so; (2) ask the interviewer how he/she prefers to be addressed; (3) never interrupt the interviewer; (4) wait for the interviewer to sit down or offer you a chair before you sit.

- Present yourself as an honest person—don't try to hide anything, but don't deliberately reveal any shortcomings either.
- Qualify and distinguish yourself in the interview: relate your specific skills and experience to the position for which you are applying. Bring out your unique characteristics and experiences and relate them to the position in order to distinguish yourself.
- Sell yourself—project enthusiasm for the job without sounding too ingratiating (don't grovel). Make only positive remarks about yourself, your experience, and your previous employer (don't sell yourself short).
- Ask for the job; tell the interviewer that you are really interested in working for him/her and want the job.
- Try to get a firm idea of what the next step will be before the interview ends.
- If you're sure that the job is not for you because of a factor such as location, salary, or chance for advancement, it is often best to say so directly during the interview.



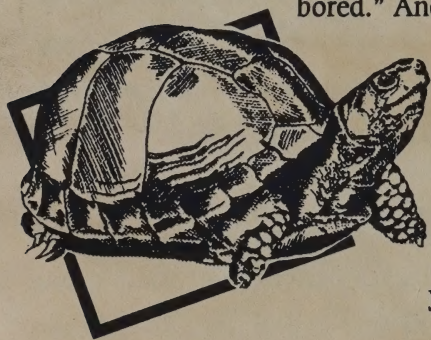
Responding to the Most Commonly Asked Questions During an Interview

- **Tell me about yourself:** Outline your strong points and accomplishments, make a summary statement, and then stop talking.
- **What qualifies you for this job?:** Relate your most positive qualifications and experiences first. Again, be prepared with your success stories ahead of time and relate them as if they were spontaneous thoughts.
- **Why do you want this job..or..why do you want to work for this organization?:** Make positive remarks about the work of the office—show that you've done your homework—display your knowledge subtly.
- **What are your goals—long-term or short-term?:** Be careful not to appear arrogant. Instead, phrase your reply along the lines of, "I'd like to get experience in these areas and I hope to gain increased responsibilities and perhaps become a...or have a position like yours someday." Be careful of motherhood and apple pie statements.
- **Why do you want to leave your present job?:** Never say anything negative about your present employer or the organization/agency—even if it's true. Don't mention money; if that sounds like your only motivation; the in-



interviewer will find someone who's interested in the responsibilities of the position. The best bet is to make positive remarks about the position and your desire to assume more responsibilities.

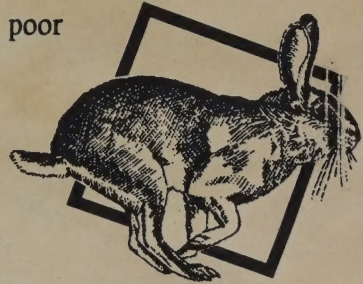
- **What are your weaknesses?:** The best weaknesses are disguised strengths, such as, "I'm not happy when I'm not challenged by my work" instead of "I'm easily bored." Another good approach is to give an irrelevant weakness, such as, "I don't do this well, or I don't operate this kind of machine well"—something that won't be required of you in the position you're after.



- **How do you work with groups—are you a team player?:** Describe some of the team efforts you have been involved in and be sure to give credit to your coworkers for their contributions to the product.
- **Describe the work you do now:** Overemphasize your importance or the importance of the work you do. Describe some of the more routine work as well, so that you make it known that you don't neglect details.

Greatest Reasons Why Applicants are Rejected After the Interview

- Poor personal appearance.
- Overbearing, overaggressive, overconfident, conceited, superiority complex, know-it-all attitude.
- Inability to express self clearly, poor voice, diction, grammar.
- Lack of planning for a career, purpose, and goal(s).
- Lack of interest, enthusiasm; passive, indifferent attitude.
- Lack of confidence, poise; nervousness, ill-at-ease.
- Overemphasis on salary.
- Unwilling to start at the bottom, expects too much too soon.
- Makes excuses, evasive, hedges on unfavorable items in record.
- Lack of tact.



- Lack of maturity.
- Lack of courtesy; ill-mannered.
- Condemnation of past employers.
- Lack of social understanding.
- Lack of enthusiasm.
- Fails to look interviewer in the eye.
- Indecision.
- Sloppy application.
- Overelaboration of details of experience.
- Wants the job for only a short time.
- Little sense of humor.
- Lack of knowledge in field of specialization.
- Emphasis on people s/he knows.
- Unwilling to go where agency has a need.



- Cynical.
- Intolerant, strong prejudices.
- Narrow interests.
- Lack of appreciation of the value of experience.
- Late to interview without a good reason.
- Failure to express appreciation for interviewer's time.
- Asks no questions about the job.
- High pressure type.
- Indefinite response to questions.



In summary, the employer is not doing you a favor if s/he offers you a job. Employers expect to profit by hiring you and that's why they are doing it. In other words, the employer is trying to find the answer to one simple question: **"What can you do for me?"** To force the employer to dig for that answer is ridiculous. To not know what you could do to help that employer solve his or her problem is tantamount to losing half the battle. To imply in any

way that you doubt your ability to do that work is to lose the other half. The people who succeed best in interviews do so for one of two basic reasons:

- They clearly have the skills to do the work.
- They project a feeling of confidence in their skills sufficient to overcome any perceived weaknesses on the part of the interviewer.

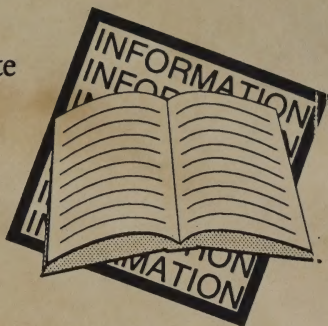
Dare to dream. Don't cancel out a goal before you've evaluated it. A positive attitude can make almost anything possible!



Suggested References

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Q&A Job Interview Book.

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Your...Knowledge, Skills and Abilities...and Advance in
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Notes

This image shows a single sheet of off-white or cream-colored paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slightly textured appearance with some minor discoloration or foxing, particularly towards the edges. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

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